Son of the Revolution

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Contents

Quiet Steps..... 1

Smoke and Iron..... 4

Vanished..... 8

Ghosts of the Revolution..... 13

Threshold..... 17

White Silence..... 22

Splinters..... 27

Echoes..... 31

Quiet Steps

The corridor groaned beneath his feet, each step a confession to anyone still awake behind the thin, splintering doors. Alexei paused after the second creak, the familiar one just past the communal sink, the place where the boards dipped slightly from years of sloshed water and unspoken arguments. He listened. The silence of the kommunalka was never complete — it was stitched with the muffled cough of a sick child, the shiver of a kettle cooling, the hush of withheld weeping. But this silence, now, felt like it had teeth.

He shifted the weight of the worn satchel on his shoulder and moved forward. The keys in his coat pocket felt heavier than usual, cold like iron truths. He passed a door where once an old professor had lived before being taken — a man who whispered Plato when he shaved and vanished before morning tea. That door was closed now, but not locked. A widow lived there, or a ghost. No one knew.

Shadows fluttered in the hallway, cast by a single dim bulb swinging above the stairwell. Alexei kept his eyes low, but the corners of his vision drank in everything — the worn boots beside flat 6B, the torn paper on the notice board still showing a cheerful decree about steel production, the smear of something brown on the wall that no one would clean.

Habit and fear walked with him. He moved like a man trained by silence, eyes tracing the movement of air itself, reading the shape of silence the way others might read a map. A breath behind a door could mean a neighbor awake, or a quiet listener. The wrong whisper could become a signature on your own arrest.

As he reached his own door, hand sliding into the coat for his key, he thought — not for the first time — that every threshold in this city now felt like the edge of a grave. He turned the lock slowly. Inside was cold and ink and solitude, the only friends he could trust.

The bed gave a low groan as he sat, springs bent by years and the weight of tired bones. Frost clung to the windowpane in branching white veins, obscuring the city beyond. But he didn't need a clear view. The shapes behind the glass were familiar — the broken roofs, the factory chimney like a blackened finger, the avenue that once carried thunder.

"Glory had a voice once," he murmured to no one. "It shouted in the streets, and we answered with bare hands."

He could still see them — boys like himself wrapped in soldier's coats, their mouths cracked from cold but full of fire. The hunger of those years had been sharp, but it was shared, purposeful. A loaf of bread meant more when you stood in line with comrades who dreamed of a world without masters. That kind of hunger didn't shame you. It made you stand taller, even when your ribs showed.

Now the same streets were draped in silence, broken only by the bark of boots and the forced cheer of brass bands. Slogans curled on every brick wall like dead skin. Stalin's face grinned

from the posters, that same glassy smile printed a thousand times over. “The people’s father,” they called him. But Alexei had learned long ago that fathers could kill their children and call it discipline.

“Long live the people,” the banner said near the tram stop. But the people no longer looked up. Their heads bowed like wheat in poisoned soil.

He rested his hand on the frost, tracing a circle in the condensation. “Lenin’s voice filled this city once. Now it’s a whisper behind locked doors.”

That was the hardest part — not the betrayal, not even the blood. It was the silence. The knowledge that truth had not died in a clash of arms, but in paperwork, in slogans, in the nods of frightened men pretending to agree. The Revolution hadn’t been crushed. It had been embalmed.

Somewhere below, a dog barked. A door slammed. He closed the curtain gently. “We gave them a dream. They turned it into a uniform.”

The hallway poster had been changed again. The old one — faded at the edges, curling like a dried leaf — had shown the Marshal in uniform, arm raised in frozen command. Now a new one stared down from the peeling plaster: Stalin seated, quiet, fatherly, his eyes a smudge of certainty under heavy brows. The caption read, “Under Comrade Stalin’s guidance, the people flourish.”

Alexei paused, eyes on the face.

“Flourish,” he said under his breath. “Is that what the cold is? Flourishing?”

The paper was thick, glossy, printed in the very press where he spent his days fixing machines. He knew the ink by scent. Knew the plates that stamped that smile onto millions of walls, into every school, every office, every barracks and bakery and prison cell. The face had become the city’s second sun — always watching, never setting.

He moved past it quickly, ducked into his room, and shut the door with a softness he had perfected over years. His fingers, numb from the air outside, slid behind the radiator. There, between rust and dust, a packet waited — rough paper, pages yellowed, lines underlined with care.

He drew one sheet out.

“The state is a product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms,” the line read in Lenin’s hand. “It is a power which arose out of society, but places itself above it.”

His eyes lingered on the sentence.

“No father in that,” he whispered. “Only a structure. A means. Temporary.”

These were not the tidy summaries printed in schoolbooks now, not the bowdlerized lessons taught by smiling Party lecturers. These were words meant to awaken, not pacify. They cracked like bone, not lull like lullabies.

He placed the page back carefully, tucking it into its nest of false warmth. The radiator clinked behind him as if in quiet agreement.

“They erase him one phrase at a time,” he thought. “But some words stick to the walls.”

The knock came like a rifle tap — sharp, certain, almost casual in its authority. Not at his door, but close. Too close.

Alexei froze mid-motion, hand hovering over the tea tin. Silence followed. That held breath before the plunge. Then came the creak of floorboards, a second knock, slower this time, more deliberate. A chair scraped, and the door next to his — Number 8, old Malenkova’s — opened.

Voices murmured, too low to catch. He moved to the wall, pressed his ear gently against the wallpaper. It was thin enough to hear the rhythm of conversation, the timbre if not the words. One voice official. The other, trembling.

He had heard this before. Not this scene, but the shape of it. Again and again. Always the same ritual: knock, pause, obedience. A few questions. Then either silence — or the slow rustle of a coat being put on forever.

“She used to teach piano,” he recalled, fingers tightening. “A quiet woman. Always carried millet to feed the birds.”

Behind the wall, something dropped. A cup? A small gasp. Then came the sobbing — not loud, not defiant. Just a low sound, like wind through a door left ajar.

That sound went deeper into him than any shout could. It was the sound of someone realizing the knock had been meant for them all along.

He leaned back, slowly, breath held.

“They don’t need proof anymore,” he thought. “Only suspicion. A face that looked unsure at a meeting. A word said too slowly. Or nothing at all — just a name on a list drawn up in a bored man’s office.”

He had known a man once — a cobbler, harmless, gentle — taken in the night because his brother’s cousin had been overheard saying something in line for beets. The cobbler never came back. The beet line did.

“This is not government,” he thought. “This is anatomy. The state has grown tendrils. It wraps around your lungs, tightens if you breathe wrong.”

The sobs stopped. The hallway gave a short shuffle of movement. Then quiet again, heavy and unnatural. He remained still, not from fear, but from knowing.

“You’re safe,” he whispered to no one. “Only until you aren’t.”

The lamp cast a weak circle of light on the warped floorboards, its filament flickering every time the wind passed through the cracked window frame. Alexei knelt by the corner wall where the plaster had been peeled and redressed with care. He pressed his thumb against a knot in the wood, then slid the panel aside with practiced silence.

Inside, wrapped in an old rag, lay a pamphlet — brittle at the edges, its cover faded to the color of old teeth. He unwrapped it slowly. The pages smelled of dust and ink and the breath of men who no longer lived.

State and Revolution.

He turned to the section he knew by heart but always read again, as if his eyes could find something new in lines already carved into his mind. The pencil marks were faint, but visible — a hand that trembled, even then, had underlined them with fierce care.

He unfolded a scrap of blank paper and dipped his pen. The ink dragged a little on the rough surface, but the words came through. He whispered them as he wrote, the sound no louder than breath:

“The replacement of the bourgeois state by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution.”

He paused, the pen tip still touching the paper.

“It’s not violence for its own sake,” he murmured. “It’s the breaking of the machine.”

His lips moved again, slower this time, as if the sentence were a charm to keep his name from tomorrow’s lists. He set the pamphlet back behind the wall, replaced the panel, and brushed a bit of dust across the seam.

This page — this one sentence — he would leave tomorrow inside the binding of a Party newspaper on tram number twelve. Folded carefully, hidden within the folds of false truth. A breath of real thought in a city choking on slogans.

He folded the scrap. “Revolution is not a moment. It’s survival with purpose.”

The lamp hummed. The wind sighed. And Alexei sat in the center of that silence, head bowed not in fear, but in reverence.

Smoke and Iron

The workshop breathed like a beast — coughing steam, exhaling smoke, grinding its iron lungs through paper and metal. The presses clattered in rhythm, too loud for speech but not loud enough to drown thought. Heat and cold coexisted here, the furnace at the back always struggling against the cracks in the walls where winter crept in.

Alexei stood bent over a jammed plate feeder, his fingers black with ink, nails etched by grease and dust. The metal groaned under his hand as he loosened the bolt, coaxing the machine back to motion. His back ached with a dull, familiar throb — the ache of repetition, of bending to fix what others had broken, always in silence.

The air stank of oil, old paper, and the sour trace of sweat in wool. Somewhere above, a fan rattled uselessly. He glanced at the small window near the ceiling. Frost curled along its edges, thin as the promises printed on the pages that flowed out of the press in endless rhythm.

“Every day we make lies,” he thought. “Efficient, uniform, and approved.”

The plate he pulled free bore an editorial praising agricultural yields. Below the bold title, the smiling face of a kolkhoz director beamed. He had seen that man once in person — drunk at a Party banquet, laughing with a mouth full of stolen teeth.

The press screeched as it restarted. He stepped back, wiping his hands on a rag that had long since ceased to absorb anything. The others around him barely looked up. Men moved like machines beside machines, each man taught not to speak, not to pause too long, not to look behind.

Alexei blinked against the fine mist of ink in the air. “This is the temple now,” he thought. “The sacred press — not for truth, but for control.”

He reached for another plate, his fingers aching from the cold trapped in metal. The work never changed. The faces changed. The slogans shifted. The lie remained.

The next plate slipped into place with a heavy clink, its teeth locking into the press as if it belonged there — a perfect cog in the mechanism. Alexei stood for a moment, hand resting on the edge, watching the rollers bite into paper and smear the lie across every page.

This morning’s issue praised the cultural renaissance of the new Soviet citizen — obedient, productive, grateful. A paragraph beneath it spoke of the people’s trust in the Party’s vision. The machine never hesitated. The ink flowed. The paper obeyed.

“And I’m the one who oils the gears,” he thought. “The priest who keeps the altar clean.”

The irony was surgical in its precision. He, who smuggled Lenin’s true words under floorboards, now spent his days ensuring the flawless birth of counterfeit thought. The press broke often, but he always fixed it. He knew the machine like an old friend — or an old enemy too intimate to leave.

He leaned back and rubbed his shoulder, eyes still on the rhythmic swallowing of the sheets. Somewhere in his memory, from the bottom of a footnote or the margin of an old page, Marx’s voice came clear: *“In his work, the worker does not affirm himself but denies himself... He does not feel content but unhappy.”*

A bitter smile pulled at the corner of his mouth.

“Alienation,” he whispered. “And here I am — alone in a room full of men.”

The press spat another pile of pages onto the tray. Each one stamped with conviction it did not believe. Each one ready to be folded, distributed, read, feared, quoted, and forgotten.

He reached for the next plate, hands slick with oil and ink. “The Party has perfected the dialectic,” he thought. “It prints chains and calls them progress.”

The press shuddered to a halt. A hiss of steam followed, sharp and final, like a breath caught too late. Across the workshop, men straightened their backs and stretched, the sudden pause granting them a few stolen minutes of stillness.

Alexei wiped his palms with the same rag, now more ink than cloth, and stepped aside. The foreman passed by without a glance — a man of few words and fewer questions. Beside the workbench, Ivan was pouring tea from a dented canister into a metal cup. His hands trembled slightly, but not from cold.

“Did you hear about Semyonov?” he asked, voice low, just above the hiss of cooling pipes. “Taken last night.”

Alexei kept his face blank, only the smallest tilt of the head to acknowledge.

Semyonov. A typesetter. Quiet. Played chess during lunch breaks with chalk-drawn boards on newspaper margins. He’d once shared a quote from Bukharin when he thought no one was listening. Apparently, someone had been.

“He had two sons,” Ivan added. “Boys still in school.”

No one said it aloud, but the words hovered in the air like soot: *They’ll grow up without a father. If they grow up at all.*

Alexei looked down at the floorboards, the dark smear of boot tracks near the press. “Someone informed,” he thought. “Always someone. A neighbor. A cousin. A colleague who didn’t like being corrected.”

He said nothing. His mouth remained still, his eyes fixed on the rust near the foot of the machine.

“There are so many ways to betray now,” he thought. “And most don’t even feel it when they do.”

Ivan sipped his tea, watching the steam curl upward. “They say he had foreign pamphlets,” he muttered. “Hidden in a book about metallurgy.”

Alexei didn’t move. The name, the pamphlets, the method — all too close. Too familiar.

“Even truth has to hide inside lies now,” he thought. “Just like the rest of us.”

The breakroom was a narrow space between two storerooms, lit by a single bulb that swung slightly with every vibration of the machines. The walls were stained from years of tobacco and boiled cabbage. A kettle hissed on the iron stove, the water never quite hot enough.

Ivan stood by the table, tapping ash from a thin cigarette into a chipped saucer. His eyes met Alexei's for a moment — not long, not inviting, but aware. They had worked beside each other for years without ever saying anything of consequence. That was how it had to be.

Alexei poured a half-cup of lukewarm tea and joined him at the table.

"You're here early today," Ivan said, almost idly.

"Woke before the light," Alexei replied. "Couldn't sleep. The city's gotten louder in the mornings."

"Or we've gotten quieter," Ivan murmured.

The words settled like dust between them. There were no rules for these conversations — only rhythms, like music composed to be hummed under breath.

"I passed through Preobrazhenskaya last night," Alexei said, taking a slow sip. "The bread line was shorter than usual."

Ivan nodded. "Fewer mouths, these days."

Neither mentioned Semyonov. They didn't have to. The space where his name should have been was already full.

"The new posters are everywhere now," Ivan said, flicking ash again. "They've even put one above the boiler downstairs. Stalin watching the furnace."

"Heat inspires loyalty," Alexei said, a faint trace of a smile crossing his face. "Even in machinery."

Ivan gave a soft laugh. "Everything needs watching. Even the walls."

Alexei glanced toward the door, then back to his tea.

"Strange," he said quietly. "How much truth a silence can hold."

Ivan met his eyes, only for a second. Sharp, assessing.

"And how much noise a truth can make," he replied.

The kettle hissed again. Alexei stood, the cup still half full.

"Back to work," he said. "The pages won't print themselves."

"No," Ivan said, grinding the cigarette into the saucer, "but they seem to know what to say."

Snow had begun to fall in soft spirals, catching in the folds of Alexei's coat and vanishing on contact like secrets too brief to be remembered. The tram station stood at the edge of a quiet square, lit only by the flickering lamp above the schedule board. A few figures waited under the overhang, faces turned inward against the cold, collars high, eyes low.

He moved without hurry, boots crunching over packed ice, the folded page tucked in his glove — not paper, not officially. Just a slip. A sentence. The kind of truth that could break a life.

The bench stood beneath the far end of the shelter, wet with meltwater, its wood warped by years. He sat for a moment, adjusting his bag as if looking for something. With one practiced motion, he slid the folded sheet beneath the seat's slat and stood again.

Across the tracks, a tram rattled into view, its windows fogged, interior dim.

A man in a heavy coat approached the bench a minute later. He sat down without glance or pause, his hand brushing the space beneath him. He did not look up, did not turn. Only pocketed something and remained there.

Alexei kept walking.

The tram bell rang behind him — two short chimes, nothing more.

His heart thudded once, twice, then faster. It wasn't fear exactly. Fear had been eaten long ago by routine. This was the body's answer to the question the mind refused to ask.

"Every truth passed hand to hand is a blade," he thought. "You never know who bleeds from it."

He turned down a side street, letting the cold bite his cheeks, his steps steady but quick. Behind him, the tram pulled away. The square returned to silence.

He didn't look back. Not once.

Vanished

The corridor smelled different.

Alexei noticed it the moment he stepped through the building's front door — not the usual blend of kerosene, boiled buckwheat, and cold dust, but something sharper. A human absence, freshly made.

He climbed the stairs slowly, coat dripping with melted snow, boots leaving a dark trail behind him. The second-floor light bulb buzzed faintly. Outside Room 7, the door stood wide open.

Her room.

Malenkova. The widow. Thin as thread and twice as fragile. She had lived there for fourteen years. Fed the birds at dawn. Pressed ironed rags against the radiator in winter like it was a child she could still warm.

The door creaked as it swung with the draft. Inside, shadows shifted. Two neighbors moved with quiet efficiency through her things. One was lifting a worn coat from a hook, inspecting the seams. The other turned over a small box of buttons and bits of string, head tilted, calculating value.

They didn't look at Alexei as he passed. They didn't need to.

"She won't be back," one of them said flatly, to no one in particular.

No questions. No shock. Not even a whisper of shame. Just the practiced emptiness of survival.

Alexei walked to his own door, fingers stiff against the key.

"Taken in the night," he thought. "But her absence has already been priced."

Inside his room, he set down his bag and listened. Not to the looters. They were not the problem. They were symptoms.

The true sound was underneath — the vacuum left by her. A silence shaped like a woman who fed birds, who once gave him a spoonful of jam without asking anything in return.

He closed his eyes.

"She's gone, and the walls forget her already."

The sound of the corridor faded behind the door, swallowed by the stillness of his small room. Alexei sat on the edge of the bed, coat still on, gloves still damp. His gaze fixed on the cracked teacup on the windowsill — Malenkova had once used the same pattern. Blue flowers faded to ghost-petals.

He could still hear them out there. The scraping of drawers, the rustle of paper, the hollow thud of empty boxes being filled. It was the quiet industry of hunger, of people doing what needed to be done.

"No hatred in it," he thought. "Only calculation. They know she's not coming back. That's enough."

There was no outrage. No whispered protest. Just the question everyone asked when a door opened into silence: *What's left behind?*

He'd seen it before. When Pavel was taken, they'd split his boots before the ink on the arrest report dried. When little Rina's father vanished, the sewing machine disappeared the next morning — no note, no word.

It wasn't cruelty. Not really. It was the cowardice that survival demands. The slow, grinding erosion of dignity by necessity. You begin by taking an empty chair. You end by looking away from the knock on your own door.

"They've been trained," he thought. "Not by force, but by subtraction — piece by piece, year by year, until nothing remains but the instinct to keep breathing."

He didn't judge them. Their shame had been stolen long ago, along with their choices. He judged what had made them this way — the machine that replaced conscience with obedience, solidarity with suspicion.

"No system should make you choose between warmth and honor," he whispered.

The scraping stopped outside. A door clicked shut.

He pulled off his gloves and laid them flat on the table, fingers still trembling. Not from cold. From remembering.

The room was too quiet now. Silence always settled differently after someone was taken — as if the building itself held its breath, unsure who would vanish next.

Alexei poured what was left of yesterday's tea into a chipped enamel cup. It had gone bitter, almost metallic. He drank it anyway.

His eyes lingered on the corner shelf where a folded pamphlet sat beneath a book of Chekhov stories. He didn't reach for it. Instead, his mind wandered — back to a room with bare walls and sawdust on the floor, the worker's club near Serp i Molot factory, where he used to meet others like himself.

They'd gather on Thursdays, after shifts, their hands still blackened with machine grease, eyes alight with something more than tiredness. Debates ran long into the night — wages, ownership, surplus value, dialectical materialism. Not slogans. Not theater. Real discussion.

He remembered the spark in Viktor's eyes when he argued about commodity fetishism — how the worker becomes invisible in the face of the object he creates. How every tool, every coat, every loaf of bread carried a ghost of the hands that made it.

"You see the shoes," Viktor had said, "but not the man who stitched them until his back broke."

Laughter. Tobacco smoke. Someone pounding the table with excitement. Even disagreement had been a kind of unity then — a shared belief that the world could be understood, and therefore changed.

Now Viktor was gone. So was the club. The door welded shut after a report labeled it a hub of deviationist thought.

And Andrei, who spoke always of syndicates and worker councils, had been taken first. Then Yuri. Then Katya.

“Every face replaced by a number,” Alexei thought. “Every number swallowed by silence.”

He gripped the cup harder, the enamel chipping at the rim cutting a thin line across his lip. He didn’t notice.

“What we had was fragile,” he whispered. “But it was alive. More alive than anything printed today.”

The snow had softened the city’s sharp edges, muffling footsteps, wrapping everything in a hush that felt almost sacred. Alexei walked the path along the edge of the park, hands deep in his coat pockets, scarf pulled high.

The bench was exactly where they’d agreed. Near the broken statue of the poet whose name no one said anymore. A bird had nested inside the hollow crown of the head. The snow had gathered on its shoulders like a second shroud.

She was already sitting when he arrived.

Nina.

She didn’t look up at first. Just stared ahead, hands folded in her lap like any woman waiting for a tram or a husband who would not come. Her hair was shorter than he remembered. The bones in her face sharper. But her presence — calm, alert — was unchanged.

He sat beside her without greeting. Two people separated by half a bench and the weight of ten cautious years.

“Cold morning,” he said.

She nodded. “Better than rain.”

Their eyes never met.

“Was it you near Preobrazhenskaya?” she asked softly.

“A folded page. Tram bench. That’s all.”

Nina’s mouth moved slightly, almost a smile.

“They still frighten easily,” she said. “A page is louder than a bomb, if it’s the right line.”

He didn’t answer.

For a long moment, they sat in silence. A child passed, dragging a sled behind him. His mother called from the path, voice sharp with exhaustion.

Nina glanced sideways, only once. Her eyes — the same dark fire he remembered from the nights when they argued over theory and strategy in a room too small for dreaming — still burned. Dimmer perhaps, but unextinguished.

“They took Malenkova last night,” he said.

“I know.”

That was all. No anger, no sorrow. Just a shared fact in a ledger too long to grieve.

She reached into her coat and handed him something wrapped in paper. A pencil stub. Nothing more.

“You’ll need it soon,” she said. “What comes next will need to be written.”

Then she stood.

He didn’t watch her walk away. It would’ve looked too much like goodbye.

The radiator clanked once, then went still. Cold seeped through the walls as night curled in around the edges of the room. Alexei lay beneath the thin blanket, coat still on, breath rising in pale clouds toward the ceiling. He drifted, not into sleep, but into something quieter — a place between memory and fever.

Snow stretched in every direction. A white plain without walls, without city, without sound. And there, alone in the vastness, stood Lenin.

No banners behind him. No crowd. Just a long coat, buttoned against the wind, and those eyes — steady, human, unblinking. His cap was dusted with snow. He made no gesture. No speech.

Alexei stood a few paces away, feet bare in the frost. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came. Words turned to steam and vanished.

He wanted to ask everything.

Did we fail you?
Was the state always going to grow teeth?
Were we naïve to believe in the end of power?

But Lenin said nothing. He only watched. Not with judgment, not with warmth — with presence. As if waiting to see what Alexei would do next.

And behind him, slowly rising from the whiteness, came the silhouettes of others — men and women with blurred faces, their mouths stitched shut. The dead. The disappeared.

The snow thickened. The silence pressed in.

He woke with his hand clenched around the edge of the blanket, breath quick, eyes wide in the dark. The walls returned. The ceiling. The familiar hum of the building’s sleeping breath.

One word remained. It echoed not like a scream, but like a confession whispered too late.

“Betrayal,” he said aloud.

It tasted like ash.

Ghosts of the Revolution

The square was smaller than he remembered, or perhaps the sky had simply grown larger — heavier with cloud, with silence. Alexei crossed it slowly, boots brushing aside the thin crust of snow that had gathered overnight.

He stopped where the statue had once stood.

Only the stone base remained — rough, pale, scabbed with chipped mortar where the figure had been severed at the ankles. Ice had formed along the cracks like veins in a corpse. The plaque had been removed, its screws still rusted into place, the imprint of forgotten words faintly visible in the stone.

A child might pass and think it had never been anything at all. Just a broken square in the middle of the city, ignored by pigeons and swept only by the wind.

But Alexei remembered.

He had stood there when the statue was unveiled. Fists raised. Smoke in the sky, songs on the lips of men who still believed history was theirs to shape.

Comrade Voroshilov, cast in iron — not for vanity, but to remind the people of the ones who fought for them. He had not been beautiful. He had not needed to be. He had stood for sacrifice. For the possibility of a worker's country.

Now even his absence had been erased.

“History used to live here,” Alexei thought. “Now it rots behind glass, rewritten for those who forget too easily.”

A woman passed behind him, coat flapping in the wind, a basket in one hand, scarf tight around her face. She didn’t look at the pedestal. Didn’t slow.

“That’s how they win,” he thought. “Not by killing memory. By letting it be ignored.”

He touched the edge of the broken stone, fingers brushing snow from a chipped corner.

“Your name won’t be spoken anymore,” he said quietly. “But I remember it. And that’s one more than none.”

The café was dim, its windows fogged with breath and heat, the air inside thick with tobacco and boiled chicory. A single bulb hung low over each table, casting small pools of light in an ocean of murk. Most of the men sat alone, hunched over newspapers or empty cups, coats still on, collars up. No one lingered here for comfort.

Alexei stepped inside and saw Mikhail near the back — a pale figure shifting in his seat, fingers tapping the rim of his glass with the rhythm of someone waiting too long with too much to say.

He approached without signaling. Sat down without greeting. That was the way.

Mikhail's mouth twitched in something close to a smile, but his eyes darted too quickly around the room. "You came," he said, voice low.

"I said I would."

Mikhail leaned in slightly. "I read the page you left. The Lenin quote." He hesitated, then added, "I'd never seen it in full before."

Alexei nodded. "Most haven't. They know only the fragments the Party permits."

"The part about the state withering away…" Mikhail's eyes lit. "They've removed that from the new printings."

"Of course," Alexei replied. "That's the part they fear."

For a moment, the boy's eagerness filled the space between them. His hands gestured as he spoke, his voice rising just slightly before he caught himself and dropped it again. He was quick, hungry, not for fame or reward — but for something rarer. For understanding.

And watching him, Alexei saw a shadow of his own youth — that same fever behind the eyes, the same conviction that words were weapons, that theory mattered, that the truth could be sharpened and hurled like a blade.

He also saw the danger.

"You must be careful," Alexei said quietly. "Fire draws moths, but it also draws eyes."

Mikhail nodded, swallowing his questions. But his knee bounced beneath the table.

"You still believe it can change?" he asked. "That we can bring it back — the real thing?"

Alexei looked down at his hands, blackened from work, cracked from cold.

"I believe it hasn't died," he said. "But it's buried. Beneath lies. Beneath fear. And the digging is dangerous."

Mikhail said nothing. Just stared at him with hope like a blade pressed between his teeth.

The café's hush deepened as the hour wore on. Two men near the counter played dominoes without speaking. A kettle hissed in the back room. Somewhere, a chair scraped against the floor.

Their tea had gone cold. Mikhail's fingers trembled slightly as he traced the rim of his glass.

"They control everything," he said, voice just above a whisper. "The papers, the police, even the words we're allowed to say. What else is left but—" he paused, glanced around, then leaned closer, lowering his voice to a thread, "—action?"

Alexei didn't move.

“You mean violence,” he said flatly.

Mikhail shifted. “I mean… resistance. Something more than paper and whispers.”

For a long moment, Alexei said nothing. He stared at the young man, eyes steady, expression unreadable.

“Say what you mean,” he said at last. “Not what you hope I’ll approve of.”

Mikhail swallowed. His voice steadied, but only just.

“Do you think violence is justified? Against them? The ones who have turned the Party into this…” he struggled for the word, “this machine?”

Alexei leaned back slightly, arms crossed. The silence between them thickened.

“I think careless words get people killed,” he said. “Even in cafés.”

Mikhail flinched, looked down.

“And I think,” Alexei continued, his tone colder now, “that if you need to ask me whether violence is justified, then you’re not ready to wield it.”

The younger man’s hands clenched in his lap. His excitement had burned down to something smaller — shame, maybe. Or doubt.

Alexei watched him quietly.

“It’s not about anger,” he said more softly. “It’s about clarity. Violence without clarity is just noise. And we have enough of that already.”

Mikhail nodded, but his eyes were distant now, focused somewhere far beyond the steam-darkened windows.

The conversation had shifted. The rhythm had broken. Something between them — fragile and new — now stood on uncertain ground.

The stairwell creaked beneath his boots as Alexei climbed, each step echoing in the narrow shaft like a quiet accusation. A child coughed behind a door. Somewhere above, water dripped from a pipe into a rusted basin with maddening regularity.

His room welcomed him with the usual cold and the usual silence. He lit the oil lamp with a match that hissed like a warning, then sat at the small table beside the wall. From beneath the loose floorboard, he drew out the worn copy of *State and Revolution* — its cover soft with handling, its corners rounded by time and care.

He turned to the page he knew too well.

“The state is a product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms,” the line read. “It is an instrument for the oppression of one class by another.”

His eyes moved slowly, though he had long since memorized the words. Lenin's voice was still there, precise and uncompromising — a voice that once guided the hands of a movement, that lit fires in factory halls and village squares.

He paused at the passage that had once made his breath catch with wonder: *"The special bodies of armed men, prisons, etc., are the chief instruments of state power."*

His thumb lingered on that line.

"It was supposed to disappear," he murmured. "To wither. To dissolve into the people."

But the state hadn't withered. It had grown — swollen with fear and blood and bureaucracy. Its reach extended into schools, into kitchens, into dreams. It watched from every hallway wall, smiled from every ration line.

"What vanished wasn't the state," he thought. "It was the dream that it could end."

He closed the book and let his hand rest on it, heavy with years.

"We did not destroy the old world," he whispered. "We taught it to wear a red flag and speak our language."

A gust of wind slipped through the window frame, scattering a few scraps of paper across the floor. He didn't bother chasing them.

What was lost would not be gathered tonight.

The fire in the stove had gone out hours ago. The chill in the room now settled in his bones, not sharp, just steady — like the presence of something long overstayed. Alexei sat with the lamp burning low, its wick trimmed to the last breath of oil.

On the table before him lay a torn scrap of brown wrapping paper, creased and ink-stained. He dipped the pen slowly, letting the silence fill the room around him like fog.

The line came without effort. It had lived in his chest for days.

The state is not withering. It is feeding.

He stared at it for a moment. The ink pooled slightly in the curl of the "g." The words looked heavier on the page than they had in his mind, as if weighted by the truth they carried.

"It feeds on silence," he whispered. "On trust. On memory."

He reached for the tin of matches, struck one. The flame flared and settled.

The paper curled as the fire touched it — slowly at first, then all at once. Words twisted into smoke, into ash, into nothing. He watched until the last ember vanished in the blackened dish.

No evidence. No artifact. Just the echo.

“It was supposed to wither,” he said again, more to the dark than to himself. “That was the promise. A world without rulers.”

But the world had kept its rulers. Changed their uniforms. Gave them new words. Let them call themselves liberators.

He leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling, where cracks spidered out like veins from the lamp’s faint light.

“Feeding,” he murmured. “And we are the meat.”

Outside, a dog barked once, then stopped. The building slept. The fire was gone. And the night closed in like a thought too dangerous to finish.

Threshold

They met at the edge of Izmailovsky Park, beneath the skeleton of a tree that hadn’t bloomed in years. The paths were crusted with frozen mud, the benches warped with age, the snow melted into gray slush where footsteps never lasted long.

Mikhail arrived late, eyes scanning the horizon in sharp, jerking movements. He looked thinner than before, his cheeks hollowed, the excitement in his expression carved down into something harder.

No greeting passed between them. No need.

He reached into his satchel and handed Alexei a small bundle wrapped in newspaper. Nothing unusual — an ordinary exchange between ordinary men. But both of them held their breath for just a second too long.

Alexei took it without a word, tucking it beneath his coat with practiced ease. The weight against his ribs was unfamiliar, dense, quiet. Not loud like a gun. Not elegant like a book.

Heavy like consequence.

Mikhail stepped back, arms folded. “It’s simple,” he said, barely moving his lips. “Timed. Enough for one floor, maybe more, depending on the supports. The casing’s nothing. It’ll pass as scrap metal if someone checks.”

Alexei nodded once. His eyes didn’t leave the boy’s face.

“You’re sure about the man?” he asked.

Mikhail’s jaw tensed. “He signs the deportation orders. I saw the list myself. They don’t even hide the names anymore.”

A gust of wind passed between them. The branches above groaned, as if trying to speak but too stiff with frost.

The package pressed cold against his chest now. Not just a device — a promise.

“We don’t do this to punish,” Alexei said. “This isn’t revenge.”

“I know,” Mikhail replied. “It’s a warning.”

But Alexei wasn’t sure if the boy believed that. Maybe he didn’t either.

He turned without another word and walked away, the package shifting with each step. With every stride, it felt heavier. Not in mass, but in meaning.

“History will call it a crime,” he thought. “But history is written by cowards in warm offices.”

And still, the weight of it felt like fate.

The building stood like all the others — gray, square, undecorated except for the plaque above the door: *Property of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs.* The words gleamed dully in the winter light, recently polished. They always polished the lies.

Alexei crossed the street slowly, his hands deep in his coat pockets, collar turned high. Around him, the city moved in its usual hush — boots on snow, muffled voices, the clatter of a trambell somewhere distant.

He paused across from the building and let his eyes drift lazily over it, as if bored, as if waiting for someone. But every detail locked into memory with precision.

Third floor, right side. Curtains drawn in all but one window. No guard at the door — not here, not for him. Just a single buzzer on the brass panel, fingerprints smudged across the top row.

There was no plaque naming the man. They didn’t name men like him. Only positions: Regional Allocation Supervisor. Administrative Review Officer.

But Alexei knew his name. And his work.

He’d seen it in the records Nina brought. Red underlines. Names struck through. Columns marked “transported.” The neatness of the handwriting had stayed with him more than the names.

He moved closer, pausing at the edge of the curb to tie his boot — a gesture rehearsed a dozen times. From here he could see the steps more clearly. A crack in the stone near the rail. A light bulb out above the side door. A rusted drainage pipe — wide enough.

“The lives taken from this place,” he thought, “begin with the sound of that door closing behind them.”

The street was quiet. No one looked at him. No one saw a man tying his boot and studying a place where history lived quietly behind bureaucratic glass.

“It doesn’t look evil,” he thought. “It looks like work. That’s what makes it so dangerous.”

He stood, wiped his hands on his coat, and walked on. The package nestled beneath his arm like a held breath.

The package pressed against his ribs like a hidden heartbeat. He sat on the low wall of a courtyard and watched steam rise from a manhole, curling and vanishing like discarded promises. The city around him moved in small, necessary motions — a woman bargaining over bread, a boy chasing a scrap of paper, a cart creaking past. None of it stopped for the weight under his coat.

“Is killing a line in a ledger?” he asked the cold, the words sounding stupidly small in the open air. “Is it a punctuation to history, or only a stain on the hands that touch it,” he added, as if argument could sharpen ethics into certainty.

Memory came like the ache of a long march. He saw Andrei’s hands, limp on a narrow bed, palms still marked with grease from the factory. He saw Yuri’s laugh, cut off in the doorway where the men took him. He remembered Katya’s last look, not angry but bewildered, as if someone had explained to her that the world had turned and she had not been invited. These faces had needed nothing from him but witness, and he had given them the small, bitter consolation of memory.

“They died for a vision,” he said aloud, but the sentence split under its own weight. “And what do I offer in return? Another death?” The question thudded in him like a fist against a locked door.

He ran his thumb along the seam of the package until the edge of the paper bit his skin. The device inside could stop a man who signed transports. It could halt a train of suffering, perhaps. It could also replace one terror with another, one absence with another. The calculus of harm had become a ledger with no columns that made sense.

“You do not kill for vengeance,” he whispered, testing the phrase as if it were fragile glass. “You kill to prevent a greater crime. Or you tell yourself you do, and that is where the lie begins,” he added, the admission tasting of iron.

Images crowded him: Semyonov’s chessboard, Malenkova’s birdseed, the list Nina had passed him in the park — names underlined like targets. Each name pulled at a cord in him, threads of responsibility tangled with the cord of his own fear. If he acted, he would cross a line. If he did not, he would live with the weight of those who continued to be taken because he had kept his hands clean.

“Clean hands are a luxury,” he thought, the sentence settling like a stone in his mouth. “Comfortable hands sign papers. Dirty hands bear scars. Which is the truer measure of

courage?” The answer was not clean. Courage and guilt braided together until they were indistinguishable.

He pictured Lenin’s words about the state, the promise that the instruments of power would wither when people themselves became the architects of their life. “We promised so much,” he murmured. “We wanted the state to die by becoming unnecessary. Instead it has grown teeth and learned to sow fear.” The betrayal was a slow theft — not one night’s raid but a long, steady embezzlement of hope.

A bird landed on the rail nearby, cocked its head, and then flew off. Ordinary things continued as though nothing had been rearranged in the undercurrent of the city. The thought made his chest tighten.

“If I place this and a man dies, will history excuse me? Will the worker at the press who sets his jaw each morning say I did what needed doing?” he asked, almost pleading, as if answers might be found in the stoicism of strangers. There were no answers, only reasons grown thin from overuse.

He folded his hands over the package and felt the tremor in his fingers. “We are not judges,” he thought, “and yet necessity has put a jury in our chests.” The word jury made him want to laugh and cry at once — the law of the street, the court of need.

At last he rose, the weight in his coat as much a decision as an object. The argument inside him had not ended; it had only changed its voice, become quieter, more precise. He moved toward the gate, each step measured, each breath a small oath.

“Do this not for blood,” he told himself, voice low and steady. “Do it for the names who cannot speak.” The line between salvation and sin blurred, but the faces he carried in his mind sharpened, and with them a resolve that felt less like triumph and more like exile.

The courtyard smelled of metal and cold. He moved with the kind of calm that comes only when a body has rehearsed a motion until the mind can step aside. Hands in pockets, coat collar up, he crossed the yard as if going to a delivery, as if his errands were as banal as any other man’s. The package under his coat pressed against his sternum like a second heartbeat.

He let his feet take him to the side entrance he had watched for days — the one whose paint flaked in a particular pattern, the one with the loose step that complained when pressed. The stairwell was empty, a tunnel of concrete and faces long since forgotten. He climbed two at a time, then one, then slow, listening for any sound that did not belong: a radio, a boot, a laugh too cheerful.

At the door he paused, feeling the cold at his face and the heat in his palms. His movements were small and deliberate: the hand that opened the satchel, the careful folding of the paper, the avoidance of any motion that might catch light or attention. He did not look in the windows. He did not glance at the brass nameplate with its official title. Eyes down, voice mute, steps practiced.

“You do this because the ledger has become thicker with names,” he whispered, the words a talisman tucked beneath his breath. “You do this because somewhere a child will learn to sleep without listening for boots.” The thought did not steady him; it focused him.

He set the bundle down for a moment to ease the strain on his arm, checking again that nothing had shifted. The street outside remained indifferent, a single dog tracing circles in snow, a tram clanging in the distance. He felt the weight of the waiting world — ordinary lives sliding past his like a film where he had suddenly stepped in front of the lens.

Beneath the cornices, behind a loose stone, in a hollow that had been nothing to anyone before his fingers found it, he placed the package. He did not invent the space; he simply used one that already existed. His hands worked as if following a choreography learned long ago: slide, tuck, fold, press. He avoided any sound that might advertise what he did. Even the rustle of paper became a risk.

“You are only an instrument,” he told himself, softer than the scrape of a shoe. “Not a judge, not a god.” The sentence steadied his hand and made his breath sharper.

He smoothed his coat, stepped back a pace, and stood for a single suspended moment to look at the building as if he were an indifferent passerby. The city held its breath too, or perhaps that was only his own chest tightening. He felt the old knot at the center of his ribs, the old knowing that an action moves outward like a stone tossed into water — waves, consequences, ripples touching faces he loved and faces he did not.

Then he turned and walked. His legs moved before his head had a chance to argue. The package shifted once beneath his arm, a small, weightless thing when considered from a distance and a terrible thing when remembered up close.

“History will call it a crime,” he thought as his pace took him down the street, breath leaving little clouds into the cold. “And maybe it is. But names have been erased long before this.” The words faded into the night with the steam from his mouth.

His boots struck the pavement with the steady rhythm of restraint. Not too fast. Not hurried. Just enough to blend with the winter silence. The sky above was the color of ash, and the air held the stillness of something waiting to be broken.

He passed the tram stop without glancing at the schedule. A man selling bread loaves from a box called out prices behind him. Somewhere far off, a dog barked once, then was quiet.

He reached the corner and turned.

Then it came.

A low, muffled thump. Not the roar the Party films showed when enemies were captured in their own flames. Not the chaos of sabotage dreamed up by boys in exile.

No — it was quieter than all of that.

A dull impact, like a door slamming shut in a distant part of a dream. Or the sound a wall makes when it gives way inward, taking everything behind it into silence.

No shouts followed. No running. Not yet.

He didn't stop walking. Didn't flinch. His hands remained at his sides, loose but ready. A woman across the street bent to tie her boot, oblivious. A tram's bell echoed faintly through the fog. The world carried on.

Each step he took after that belonged less to the man who'd walked into that courtyard and more to someone else — someone reshaped by the act, however quiet, however invisible.

"You can't undo it," he thought, voice soundless in his head. "Not the fire. Not the choice."

He didn't need to look back. The sound had written itself into him. Not just as an event, but as a mark. A dividing line.

Something had ended.

Something had begun.

And neither could be named aloud.

White Silence

Snow fell the way dust falls in forgotten rooms — soft, steady, indifferent. It muffled the corners of the city, turned bricks into blurred shapes, softened sharp edges into silence. It covered everything without question: the cobblestones, the benches, the bootprints that had led men to their arrests, and the faint smear of blood that lingered by the stairwell near Sretenka Street. All of it buried under the clean white pretense of purity.

Alexei moved through the whitened streets like a shadow with breath. His coat blended with the dull greys around him, his steps made no sound against the padded earth. No one looked at him. In Moscow, the less you looked, the longer you lived.

He passed a frozen fountain where pigeons huddled like stones and saw a pair of soldiers drinking tea beside a tram station. Their rifles were slung casually, like props, but their eyes scanned windows.

"Still looking for smoke," he thought. "But not from chimneys."

Nothing had been printed in the papers about the explosion. Just a brief line about a structural fault in a Party residence. One man hospitalized. No names. No investigations. No mention of fire. That was how the State handled it — not with noise, but with erasure.

"The silence is the punishment," he thought, "and the silence is the reward. They don't want martyrs. They want amnesia."

He moved past a group of schoolchildren kicking a snow-covered rock back and forth, their laughter muffled by scarves. One girl paused, looked up at him with the clear eyes of someone still too young to be taught what to fear.

Then she turned away.

The sky hung low, colorless. The smoke from chimneys rose straight, undisturbed by wind.

Every corner, every doorway, every set of eyes held the quiet tension of a city that knew something had happened but was too well-trained to ask what.

“I walk, but I am not here,” he told himself. “Ghosts leave no prints. And today, the snow does the work for me.”

He stepped over a buried bootprint that vanished as he passed, and kept moving through the city, unseen by all who wished not to see.

The basement smelled of old coal and wet stone. The air was thick, still, laced with the faint musk of earth that had not seen light in generations. A single bulb dangled from a wire above the crates they used as chairs. Shadows moved across the walls like smoke that had nowhere left to rise.

Nina stood near the door, arms wrapped around herself, eyes fixed on the floor. Mikhail paced. He couldn’t keep still. His boots scuffed the concrete, the echoes too loud in the closeness of the room.

“It worked,” Mikhail said again, barely able to keep the grin from his face. “He’s in hospital. Rumors say internal bleeding. The building’s sealed. They don’t even know how to frame it.”

Nina said nothing. Her fingers moved over her sleeves as if trying to rub out the cold.

Alexei sat on the crate in the corner, hands resting lightly on his knees. He watched the dust swirl in the lamp’s glow, waiting for Mikhail’s words to run their course.

“They’ll have to notice,” the boy went on. “People will talk. Quietly, yes, but they’ll feel it. Something happened. Someone pushed back.”

His voice rose slightly with each word. That same heat burned in him — that restless desire for consequence, for movement.

Nina finally spoke. “They’ll strike back harder.”

Her voice wasn’t loud, but it landed with more weight than Mikhail’s excitement.

“They always do,” she added. “Every action like this has a tail. It drags others with it. The wrong ones.”

Mikhail turned to her. “So we do nothing?”

“No,” Alexei said, his first word since he’d arrived. “You don’t do nothing. But you do it knowing the cost.”

They both looked at him.

He met neither gaze. His eyes were fixed on a crack in the wall, where a line of water had stained the stone years ago and never dried.

“I’ve seen what follows,” he said quietly. “The names that end up on the wrong desks. The families who lose someone without knowing why.”

Mikhail frowned, but said nothing.

Nina stepped closer. “What do we do next?”

Alexei stood slowly. The room felt smaller now.

“We move carefully. We watch. We listen.”

Then, after a pause, he added, “We don’t speak of what’s already done.”

They all stood there a moment longer, surrounded by the weight of something unspoken — the turning of a tide that no one had called for, but could no longer stop.

The streets were quieter than usual when he stepped back into the open air. Snow drifted in slow spirals, gathering on ledges, muting every footstep. His breath came out in short clouds, but it wasn’t the cold that made him walk slower. It was the thought that had begun to gnaw at him again — that old, persistent question.

The people.

The words had once made his chest swell. They were shouted in squares, painted on banners, printed on leaflets smuggled from Petrograd to Kiev. *Power to the people. Victory for the people. Truth belongs to the people.*

But now, walking past shuttered shops and posters curling at the corners, he no longer knew who that meant.

“Are they the ones who steal coats from vanished neighbors?” he asked himself. “The ones who nod at speeches they no longer hear? The ones who say nothing when a door opens and doesn’t close again?”

He passed a man hunched over a cart, selling potatoes that looked more like stones. The man didn’t raise his head. Just muttered numbers to no one in particular, eyes sunken, hope long since bartered for warmth.

“Are these the people?” Alexei thought. “The broken? The silent? The ones too tired to remember who they once were?”

He passed children scraping the snow off a tram rail with sticks. They laughed — not the laugh of joy, but of hunger given rhythm. Their faces were red from cold, their coats stitched with thread that had already given up.

“Or are they the people?” he wondered. “The ones who will inherit this. The ones who’ve never seen a world without chains?”

He stopped at a corner where an old woman swept the steps of a building, her motions automatic, endless. Her eyes didn’t meet his. No one’s did anymore. Eyes, he’d come to learn, were the first things the State took.

“I believed in them once,” he whispered. “Not as an idea, but as a force. A rising tide.”

Now they moved like ghosts — each trapped in their own silence, suspicious of sound, allergic to memory.

“If there are still people,” he thought, “they are scattered. Like seeds flung into salted ground.”

And he walked on, wondering whether the Revolution had truly failed — or if it had simply turned the very people it claimed to serve into soil.

The headline was buried halfway down the second column of *Izvestia* — not bold, not large, but sharp enough to pierce.

“Counter-revolutionary element disrupts Party stability. Investigation underway. Justice will be swift.”

No names. No mention of a bomb. Only the language of shadows: *element, disruption, stability.* A vocabulary designed to say everything and nothing at once.

Alexei read it at the print shop during the midday lull. The ink was still fresh. He held the page a moment longer than necessary, then folded it and set it aside, as if it meant no more than the price of eggs. But inside, the tremor had already begun.

That afternoon, two men from the local komitet walked through the workshop in silence, eyes scanning not machines, but faces. One lingered behind Ivan’s station, studying the charts pinned to the wall. Another took slow, deliberate steps past the coat rack, pausing to check the pockets of a hanging jacket.

Nobody spoke. No one dared.

By evening, the news had passed between lips too careful to form full sentences. A search had been conducted at a dormitory near Arbatskaya. A typesetter at another plant had not returned from lunch. A widow had been questioned for a letter she never wrote.

And by nightfall, they came to the kommunalka.

Alexei heard them before he saw them — boots on stairs, voices low but firm. A knock. A pause. Then another knock, firmer. Two doors down. Not his. Not yet.

He sat still in his room, hands folded, eyes fixed on the seam in the floorboards where his pamphlets lay hidden.

“They don’t need to prove,” he thought. “They only need to suspect. And suspicion is never clean. It stains everything it touches.”

Another door opened. A voice cried out, muffled by distance. A man swore. A woman shouted a name — then silence.

“They’re not hunting a man,” he whispered. “They’re dragging a net across the city.”

The phrase echoed in his chest. The net is being cast. Not for guilt. Not for answers. But for presence. For nearness. For *maybe.*

And the net did not care what it caught.

He waited until the footsteps had faded, until the stairwell had returned to its usual creaks and coughs, and only then did he move. Quietly, slowly, each motion deliberate — not out of fear, but habit. The silence of survival had long ago become muscle memory.

He stepped into the corridor. The door across the hall hung open, its frame splintered where the lock had given way. No one lingered. No voices rose. Just the echo of what had been taken.

As he passed the landing, something caught his eye — a scrap of paper half-tucked behind a loose stair rail, barely visible beneath the layer of tracked-in snow and ash. He knelt, brushed the grit away, and pulled it free.

A child’s drawing.

Rough lines in dull pencil. A house, uneven but full of intent. A crooked tree beside it. Two figures — stick-limbed, smiling, holding hands. And above them, drawn in bright red crayon, a star. Five points, bold, shining like a sun in a sky without clouds.

The kind of picture a child would show to a teacher, or tuck into a parent’s coat before they left for work. Simple. Hopeful. Still untouched by irony.

Alexei held it carefully, as though it might crumble at the edges. His eyes lingered on the red star. Not the one carved into Party banners. Not the stamped steel sigil above government doors. This one was drawn with a trembling hand and a soft wax crayon — the kind that smudged too easily.

“This is what we meant,” he whispered, voice breaking as the words left his mouth. “This is what we wanted to build.”

Not a weapon. Not a prison. Not fear passed down like inheritance. Just this — a house, a tree, two people, and a future marked by hope.

He sank to the stair, hand still clutching the drawing, and the tears came before he could resist them.

Silent at first, then sudden. Not dramatic. Not loud. Just deep — pulled from a place that had not opened in years.

He wept not for himself, but for all of it. For the boy or girl who had drawn this and for the house that might never be built. For the star that no longer meant what it once did.

And as the wind scraped softly against the walls outside, he let it come. Because even a man who lives in silence must break, or be broken.

Splinters

Something in the air had changed. Not loud, not named, but present — like the way animals sense a storm long before the first thunderclap.

Alexei felt it the moment he stepped into the workshop. The rhythm was wrong. The presses clattered as always, the smell of ink and metal still clung to the air, but the silence between the machines was heavier. Men moved with less noise, shoulders hunched, eyes a little too focused on the bolts and trays before them.

And then there was Ivan.

He stood at his usual post, sleeves rolled, jaw tight. But his movements were stiff, mechanical, as if trying too hard to be ordinary.

Alexei watched him out of the corner of his eye. The way his gaze flicked too often toward the foreman's office. The way he didn't greet anyone. The way his fingers fumbled once, just slightly, over the levers he'd adjusted every day for years.

A chill crawled into Alexei's chest.

"He knows," he thought. "Or suspects. Or someone's spoken to him. Something's shifted."

When the bell rang for break, Ivan didn't follow the others to the bench. He stood alone near the window, lighting a cigarette with hands that shook once, then steadied. His eyes scanned the yard below.

Alexei didn't approach. He didn't speak. He only watched — from behind the dull edge of a machine, through the haze of steam and dust.

Every movement in the room felt magnified. A wrench dropping. A laugh that didn't belong. A door creaking open too slowly.

He wiped his hands on the rag without needing to, just to give them something to do. His breath came shorter than usual. Not panic. Not yet. But a tightening.

“The noose doesn’t arrive with a roar,” he thought. “It slips in like a thread, almost polite.”

And something in Ivan’s posture — that subtle stillness, the unfinished glance over the shoulder — whispered a word louder than speech.

Betrayal.

He didn’t want to believe it. But belief was a luxury he’d discarded long ago.

The news came in a whisper at the edge of the workshop yard, passed between two men leaning close over a sputtering cigarette. One of them glanced at Alexei, then looked away too quickly. That was how he knew.

He didn’t ask. He didn’t need to.

He waited until break ended, until the machines drowned out the city again, until the foreman had barked something half-heard from the stairwell. Then he stepped behind the stacks of unused paper rolls and sat on the low crate they used for repairs.

They took her last night.

That was all they’d said. No address, no charge, no explanation. Just a fact.

He saw her face as it had been in the park — calm, drawn, brave in the quiet way only those who have already lost too much can be. The way her eyes had met his only once. The way she had handed him that pencil stub like it was the last piece of herself that could be spared.

Her voice, steady in the basement: *We don’t speak of what’s already done.*

And now she was gone.

“They don’t leave traces anymore,” he thought. “They don’t need to.”

No one in the building would admit to seeing her taken. No one would mention the boots in the stairwell or the light left burning all night behind the third-floor window. No one would remember the sound of her name.

But Alexei couldn’t forget it. He couldn’t close his eyes without seeing her — not in chains, not screaming, but just as she had been: still, watching him, waiting for a world that never arrived.

“She knew the risk,” he whispered, the words empty the moment they touched the air.

He pressed his hands against his knees, stared at the cracked concrete beneath his boots.

“She knew,” he said again.

But knowing never made it easier. And now the city felt colder, sharper — as if something vital had been cut from it, and the wound refused to close.

The building on Serafimovicha Street looked the same as always — heavy with soot, its bricks darkened by years of smoke and forgetting. The stairwell smelled of boiled cabbage and dust. Alexei climbed quickly, each step silent, heart loud.

Mikhail's door was ajar. That alone was wrong.

He stepped inside without knocking. The air was cold — window open, stove cold, nothing burning. The small table had been cleared. No cup, no papers, no crumbs. The bedding was stripped. A smear of ash on the floor told him something had been burned in the basin, fast and quiet.

Alexei moved to the window. There, just as they had agreed in a moment of precaution no one believed they'd need, were three matches — unlit, aligned, like soldiers in retreat.

"Mikhail is running," he thought. "He left before they could name him."

Not fled. Not escaped. *Running.* That was the word. Because it wasn't freedom he was going toward. It was the blur beyond the line, the country's frozen edge, the railway woods, the silence of places where names didn't echo.

Alexei sat on the windowsill for a moment. The matches lay between his fingers now, rough and ordinary.

He remembered the boy's fire, the way his voice had risen in the café, trembling with conviction. "Someone pushed back," Mikhail had said.

Now the boy was gone.

"He was always a flame," Alexei thought. "And flames don't last. They leap, then vanish."

Below, the street moved on as if nothing had shifted. A mother scolded her child. A man struggled with a bicycle chain. The city, indifferent, breathed on.

He placed the matches back exactly where they'd been. Let the sign remain.

Someone else might come looking. Someone else might need to know: he ran, and he ran in time.

The pressroom was nearly empty, its machines at rest, the air still carrying the scent of warm metal and old ink. It was late — past curfew for some, past caution for most. Only the hum of a single lamp and the faint creak of cooling pipes marked the hour.

Ivan stood near the back, beside the bench where worn tools waited in shadow. He didn't move when Alexei entered. Just looked up, cigarette barely lit between his fingers, smoke drifting toward the ceiling like a question neither of them had asked yet.

"You knew," Alexei said quietly.

Ivan didn’t answer. Not right away. He took a slow drag, then exhaled.

“I guessed,” he replied. “Then I stopped guessing. Didn’t matter. Not really.”

Alexei stepped closer, hands in his coat pockets, shoulders low with exhaustion. No point in theater now. No riddles.

“They’ve taken Nina,” he said. “Mikhail’s gone.”

Ivan nodded. “I heard. They’re sweeping from every side now. Looking for a center that doesn’t exist.”

There was a silence between them then — not hostile, not warm. Just shared, worn, tired.

“I didn’t speak your name,” Ivan said.

“I didn’t ask.”

Another pause.

“I could have,” Ivan added. “There were moments. It would’ve been easy.”

Alexei looked at him. “So why didn’t you?”

Ivan stared at the floor, then lifted his eyes. For once, they weren’t guarded.

“Because we all wanted something better,” he said. “Once. Before this.”

Alexei didn’t move, but something in his chest gave a slow twist.

“We did,” he said. “And now?”

Ivan’s smile was barely there. Sad. No teeth.

“Now we work in the dark and hope we’re not killing what little light is left.”

The cigarette burned to the filter. Ivan dropped it, crushed it under his boot.

“I don’t believe anymore,” he said. “But I remember.”

Alexei stood still for a moment longer. Then turned.

He didn’t say goodbye. Neither did Ivan. There was no place for farewell in a city where everyone already lived like ghosts.

The building creaked as it settled into the weight of night. Pipes groaned somewhere in the walls, and the wind whispered against the windowpane like a voice trying to remember its own name. Alexei lay on his back in the dark, fully clothed, eyes open, breath shallow.

The silence had shape. It had tension. It stretched tight across the corridor like wire.

Then — footsteps.

Not hurried. Not casual. Deliberate.

Boots.

They approached slowly, each step landing with just enough weight to announce purpose but not urgency. Alexei's fingers curled around the edge of the blanket. He didn't rise. He didn't blink.

The steps stopped just outside his door.

A pause.

No knock. No breath. Only the nearness of presence, pressed like a palm against wood.

He stared at the ceiling, unmoving, heart thudding once, twice, then falling into a rhythm more ancient than fear.

"They know," he thought. "Or they don't. Or they're deciding."

The silence stretched a moment longer.

Then the footsteps resumed — slowly, fading down the hall, swallowed by the stairwell and the deep breath of the building returning to sleep.

Still he didn't move. Not even when the cold reached up from the floorboards or the wind nudged the curtain.

He stared upward, eyes fixed on nothing, and whispered the truth already waiting inside him.

"It will be tomorrow."

Not a prediction. Not a fear. A certainty.

If not tonight, then the next. If not that knock, then the one after.

Because the State never forgets. It only waits.

Echoes

The lamp burned low, its flame a flickering eye in the corner of the room. Shadows bent across the walls like memories, stretching, reaching, then settling back into stillness. Alexei moved without urgency. Every motion was quiet, careful, deliberate — the way a man might fold the last letter he'll ever write.

The bag was small, frayed at the seams, the leather stiff with age. He laid it open on the bed and placed inside only what would not betray him: a second shirt, a strip of cloth for binding wounds or sealing heat, a tin of matches, a pencil wrapped in string, and the book.

State and Revolution.

The same copy, its spine cracked, margins scribbled with years of thought and resistance. He ran his hand once across the cover, then slid it in last, flat against the back.

The rest he left behind. The notes hidden under the floorboards. The half-finished pages tucked into hollow walls. The scrap of a child's drawing he had pressed between two bricks near the stairwell. He touched none of it.

"This isn't running," he thought. "This is subtraction."

He wasn't seeking safety. He knew there was none. He wasn't fleeing justice — there was no justice left to flee. He was erasing a name from a page the State would otherwise keep writing on until there was nothing left but an accusation.

He tightened the bag and slung it over his shoulder. The straps creaked once, like a voice just waking.

In the half-light of the room, he took one last look. Not to remember — he had remembered too much already — but to confirm. That he had been here. That he had chosen.

"Not to survive," he whispered, "but to vanish on my own terms."

And with nothing more than a breath, he blew out the flame.

The paper was coarse, yellowed from years in the drawer. He smoothed it flat against the table with both palms, then dipped the stub of pencil Nina had given him. The point was dull, the graphite soft, but it would hold just long enough.

He began without salutation. No "comrade," no "friend," no "to whom it may concern." The words weren't meant for a name. They were meant for a time that might never come — but might.

This is not confession. It is memory.

What we built was real. It lived in factories and shared bread. It lived in arguments that mattered, and in hunger made sacred by purpose. Before the slogans were weapons. Before the silence.

He paused. The pencil scratched on.

The State was meant to dissolve. Not grow fangs. Not listen at every keyhole. Not teach children to lie with the same mouths they once used to ask questions.

If you find this — whoever you are — know this: some of us remembered. Some of us still believed that justice meant more than survival.

He set the pencil down.

A corner of the paper tore slightly as he folded it. He placed it beneath the floorboard, not far from where the others lay — a different kind of page. Not theory. Not strategy. Just truth left behind like a coat for someone else to find.

“No signature,” he murmured. “Names are for arrests. Not for legacies.”

He pressed the board back into place. Stood.

The room felt lighter now. Or maybe it was just that he was finally carrying only what he chose.

The stairwell was quiet as he descended, the walls close, heavy with the smell of old dust and boiled varnish. Each step felt less like departure and more like shedding — not of disguise, but of weight. The kind that memory leaves pressed into the bones.

Outside, the city was still buried in snow. Smoke drifted from distant chimneys. Somewhere, a loudspeaker echoed a weather report, wrapped in cheerful monotony. He walked beneath it without pause, the voice barely reaching his ears.

He turned into a narrow alley, boots crunching over ice, and let his thoughts move as his body did — slowly, with intention, with the kind of clarity that only comes at the edge of action.

“The state is a fiction sustained by fear,” he thought. “Not the idea — the machinery.”

It did not care for belief. It only needed obedience. It dressed itself in revolution, in unity, in progress, but it fed on silence and offered nothing in return but continuity.

“And yet,” he whispered, “I believed.”

Even now, after everything, he still did — not in the Party, not in the names of leaders carved into granite, but in the original fire. In the workers who rose without weapons and demanded a voice. In the dream of a world where no one ruled by force.

“What is belief, if not endurance?” he asked himself. “To carry a truth long after the world has buried it.”

Some might call that madness. Others, faith. He no longer needed to name it. It was the only part of him that hadn’t withered.

He passed a boy with a sack of coal and nodded. The boy looked up, nodded back, and kept walking. No questions. No words. Just a moment — brief, human.

“The world decays,” he thought. “But belief doesn’t rot. It waits.”

And as he reached the edge of the district, where the snow grew deeper and the streets less watched, he carried that truth like a flame cupped in both hands. Not to burn. But to keep something warm.

The sky had turned the color of iron. Morning had come, but the light was thin, reluctant — more suggestion than promise. Alexei stepped out from the alley and into the street, the cold biting at his face with the blunt teeth of early dawn.

The snow was untouched. No carts yet. No boots. The city lay still beneath its blanket of frost, as if the night had frozen not just the streets but the breath of the buildings themselves. Chimneys smoked, yes, but even the smoke rose slowly, uncertain of where it was going.

He walked with no haste, leaving a clean trail behind him — two lines, straight and even, the mark of a man who wasn't fleeing.

Moscow slept. Not peacefully — never peacefully — but in that strange, tense quiet of a beast between movements. Something vast, coiled beneath brick and bone, taking its breath before another lunge.

"Beneath every stone," he thought, "a mouth. Beneath every window, an eye."

And yet, here it was — this moment. Empty street. Bare sky. His boots in the snow, the only sound.

He passed the bakery where the queue would form in an hour. A bench still covered in frost. A trolley line vibrating faintly with the anticipation of its first passenger.

No one stopped him. No one watched.

Or perhaps they did — but from behind curtains, behind lives too weary to care what one man carried in his coat, what direction he turned when the road split.

"This city has learned to look away," he thought. "And I've learned to walk like someone not worth noticing."

The cold cut through his sleeves, but it was clean, not cruel. He welcomed it. It cleared the fog. It reminded him he was still here.

And so he walked deeper into the morning, through a city that breathed but did not speak, past the ruins of oaths and monuments and the dreams buried beneath them.

The station loomed out of the frost like a monument to motion and forgetting — steel arches, soot-darkened glass, and a clock that ticked forward with the indifferent confidence of a world that had already decided.

Inside, breath hung in the air like ghosts. People moved in practiced silence, faces down, eyes flicking from ticket booths to schedules to exits. No one spoke more than needed. No one lingered.

Alexei stepped through the doors and was swallowed by it — the hum, the shuffling feet, the weight of lives in transit. His coat, patched and grey, was indistinguishable from a dozen others. His gait was tired, deliberate, the way of a man traveling for work or duty or nothing at all.

No one looked twice.

He passed a soldier sipping soup from a tin cup. A mother clutching a child's hand in one and a ration card in the other. A man asleep on a bench with his hat pulled low. None of them saw him. Not truly.

And that was the point.

He stood for a moment near Platform 3, the bag at his side, the cold still clinging to his boots. Then, without ceremony, he moved forward — merging with the slow procession of bodies boarding the morning train.

No wave. No final glance.

He disappeared into the motion, into the sameness. His coat vanished into a sea of wool and steam and breath. The doors closed behind him with a hush.

And just like that, he was gone.

But in Moscow, he remained.

In the scrap of paper behind the radiator.
In the penciled line inside a hollow stair.
In the pamphlet tucked inside a book of children’s verse.

His voice — quiet, questioning, unbroken — lived in the walls now.

And somewhere, someone would find it. Not today. Not tomorrow.

But someday.

And remember.